

How to Motivate Your Problem People

It's easy to energize employees who want to be motivated. But how do you crack the tough cases, the people who never seem to do what you want – yet take up all your time?

by Nigel Nicholson

EVERYONE KNOWS THAT good managers motivate with the power of their vision, the passion of their delivery, and the compelling logic of their reasoning. Add in the proper incentives, and people will enthusiastically march off in the right direction.

It's a great image, promoted in stacks of idealistic leadership books. But something is seriously wrong with it: Such a strategy works with only a fraction of employees and a smaller fraction of managers. Why? For one thing, few executives are particularly gifted at rallying the troops. Exhorting most managers to become Nelson Mandelas or Winston Churchills imbues them with little more than a sense of guilt and inadequacy. For another, all available evidence suggests that external incentives – be they pep talks, wads of cash, or even the threat of unpleasant consequences – have limited impact. The people who might respond to such inducements are already up and running. It's the other folks who are the problem. And, as all managers know from painful experience, when it comes to managing people, the 80-20 rule applies: The most intractable employees take up a disproportionate amount of one's time and energy.

So how do you get these people to follow your lead? How do you get them energized and committed in such a way that they not only support your initiatives but carry them out?

After 30 years of studying business organizations and advising executives, I have concluded that these are precisely the wrong questions to ask. That's because, as it turns out, you can't motivate these problem people: Only they themselves can. Your job is to create the circumstances in which their inherent motivation – the natural commitment and drive that

most people have – is freed and channeled toward achievable goals. That approach requires an entirely different managerial mind-set. Achieving this shift in perspective is anything but easy. But it's your best hope for getting the most out of your difficult employees. And if you succeed, your task won't be prodding or coaxing these people; it will be removing barriers – including, quite possibly, your own demotivating management style.

A Familiar Problem

Let's look at a couple of situations that will surely resonate with most managers. First, consider the problem facing Annette. (Though the cases in this article are real, the names and identifying details have been changed.) She is a senior designer at a large publishing and graphic design business, with dotted-line responsibility for Colin, a project team member. Always something of a maverick, Colin nonetheless has a good work history. But the team is feeling the heat because the company restructured it to reduce costs and speed turnaround times. And Colin's behavior is becoming increasingly problematic, or so Annette and Dave, the project manager and Colin's other boss, see it. Colin seems to be shirking work, and when he does complete assignments, he doesn't report back to his bosses. To Annette, Colin's behavior doesn't just reflect his inherent disregard for rules and procedures; it also signifies a reluctance to take on further assignments. After discussing the situation with Dave, Annette decides that she will be the one to talk to Colin because she has the better relationship with him.

Annette's strategy is to motivate Colin by appealing to his sense of responsibility to the project team. When she meets with him and tries to get him to accept this line of reasoning, Colin agrees to do what Annette wants. But she doesn't get the feeling that her argument has made any impact. In her opinion, Colin is in his comfort zone: He supports the other team members, even helps them to solve their problems, but he does so at the expense of fulfilling his own responsibilities. Annette wonders whether Colin has become a misfit in the new structure and will have to leave. Perhaps she should give him a formal warning at his annual appraisal. Or maybe she should transfer him to a less demanding job, in effect demoting him.

Here's another case. Paolo works in Eastern Europe as a country manager for an international property developer. George, a chartered accountant with an MBA, is a direct report whose job is to sell plots of land and develop strategic alliances with local companies. George is fairly new to this position, having previously worked in a back-

office role overseeing customer accounts. Although George is pleasant and enthusiastic, his performance is subpar and shows no signs of improvement. In fact, George has yet to sell a single parcel of land. In his dealings with potential partners, the garrulous George acts as though his bonhomie is all he needs to cut a deal. And the deals he does manage to make turn out to be ill considered and costly.

Because of these issues, Paolo meets with George several times to try to get him to change his ways. George responds with encouraging smiles, plausible excuses, and a commitment to Paolo that things will change, but nothing does. In the final analysis, Paolo decides, George is slippery and lazy. Despite his promises, George refuses to adopt a different negotiating style, and he obviously isn't prepared to do the detailed research necessary to appraise a deal. Exasperated, Paolo decides to issue George an ultimatum: Improve your game or get out. But firing George would be an expensive option; people with his background and skills are difficult to find in this part of the world.

Poor Paolo. He can almost smell the failure likely to result from a confrontation. He'll continue to get reassurances from George, but will he ever get George to change his ways and be accountable for his performance? Poor Annette. If only she could convince Colin to improve his attitude, she could hold on to a potentially valuable team member. But no matter how reasonable Annette's argument is, will she be able to get Colin to behave differently?

The Mistakes Managers Make

These two cases share some qualities that often bedevil executives in their attempts to motivate problem people. For instance, Annette and Paolo believe that they just need the right sales pitch to turn around Colin and George. Each boss thinks, "If I can only get this person to listen, he'll see the logic of my position." This approach, something I call "tell and sell," is based on a profound fallacy many of us buy into: Other people have the same thought processes we do, and, consequently, they *have* to accept the good sense of what we're saying.

But each of us has a unique profile of motivational drivers, values, and biases, and we have different ideas about what is reasonable. This frequent mismatch of perceptions leads to another common problem with managerial attempts at motivation: the futile and prolonged game of tag, with a manager repeatedly trying to slap some motivation onto the problem employee. The employee either evades the boss's attempts or, if tagged, quickly wriggles free. Think of Colin avoiding his bosses. Think of George and his elusive promises. Every manager is familiar with the "Sure, boss" meetings that end with an apparent resolution but ultimately result in more of the same old problem and the person not changing one jot.

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Decentering

The Art at the Heart of Motivation

The conceptual foundation of the motivational method presented here is the notion of “decentering.” French child psychologist Jean Piaget coined the term to describe the phenomenon of infants moving beyond a state of locked-in, self-centered perception. This change enables them to understand that spatial perspectives different from their own are possible, that the person on the other side of the table doesn’t see the table the same way. A similar shift in children’s social perceptions – understanding that people’s values and motives may also differ – comes later, especially when a child feels some sympathy for the other person.

Adults aren’t much different. With people we like, we try to understand how they feel. But a lot of the time we act in a kind of road rage: We’re in the right, and others – abstract, disembodied, and barely real to us – are in the wrong. Ask executives to talk about difficult subordinates – or even their own bosses – and you’ll get adjectives such as “lazy,” “boring,” and “dishonest,” terms that the employees or managers would never apply to themselves. Such blinkered perceptions, common in everyday life, are particularly prevalent in the hierarchical setting of business.

There’s a certain comfort in keeping difficult people at arm’s length. By treating them as problems to be solved, as objects to be manipulated with rewards and punishments, we don’t have to know what they think and feel. That



knowledge would only unsettle us. For example, what if, in seeing things from their perspective, we saw that our worldview wasn’t necessarily the right one?

As a powerful aid to decentering, you should ask yourself: “What must it be like for someone like that – that is, with that character and perspectives – to have someone like me, with my biases and drives, as a boss, client, subordinate?” The answer can guide your strategy for future encounters.

Because of the effort it takes to decenter, particularly with difficult employees, the method I propose is demanding. But it is no more difficult, and certainly it is more effective, than motivational techniques based on inspirational leadership. After all, can you really inspire people you don’t care for – and who aren’t very fond of you?

In fact, such unsatisfactory outcomes shouldn’t surprise managers like Annette and Paolo. In trying to convert Colin and George into different kinds of people, they – like most managers dealing with problem employees – have set themselves an impossible goal. A fundamental rule of management is that you can’t change people’s character; you can’t even control their actions most of the time. Change comes from within or not at all.

A New Approach to Motivation

So if Annette and Paolo have approached their problems in the wrong way, what is the right way? I propose a relatively simple method I have seen work time and again. It involves shifting the responsibility for motivation from subject to object, from boss to subordinate. Crucially, it also involves a shift in perspective: The manager needs to look at the employee not as a problem to be solved but as a person to be understood. (For a discussion of this

change in perspective, see the sidebar “Decentering: The Art at the Heart of Motivation.”) My method is based on a handful of principles:

Everyone has motivational energy. Although many problem employees display a marked lack of drive and commitment in their jobs, these qualities are usually alive and well in other areas of their lives. Certainly, not all people are going to feel the same passion for their work that they do for their hobbies or other outside interests. But it’s a mistake to write off a problem employee as simply unmotivated. Most workers have the potential to engage with their work in a way that furthers managerial goals.

This energy is often blocked in the workplace. A variety of factors can block people’s natural motivation. For example, impediments may appear suddenly because of new stresses at home or may accumulate incrementally over years, the product of frustrated dreams or broken promises at work. The effect is to transform a person’s

positive energy into negative attitudes and behavior—or simply to divert it into nonwork activities. One of the most common blockages occurs when employees feel that their bosses don't really care about them. For this or other reasons, problem employees usually don't much like their managers. And chances are that the sentiments are mutual—which makes conventional pep talks about improving performance come across as insincere, at best.

Removing blockages requires employee participation. To motivate an employee to work toward your goals, you need to take a judolike approach: Find the person's locus of energy and leverage it to achieve your ends. Instead of pushing solutions on people with the force of your argument, pull solutions out of them. Turning the tables gets employees' attention at the very least; ideally, it prompts them to clear the obstacles impeding their motivation. To accomplish this, you may have to rethink what your problem employees can reasonably be motivated to do. But the approach will help you get the best from them, whatever their abilities and skills.

Let's look at potential objections to the method I'm proposing. "This all sounds too soft and squishy to me," you might say. Or, "I've got a business to run and have neither the inclination nor the time to serve as the sympathetic shrink to a bunch of 'blocked' employees who refuse to get with the program."

First, while this method is based on empathy, it is anything but soft. It demands that a manager take charge of a difficult situation and resolve it. In fact, the truly spongy

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method is what you are probably using now: either ignoring your problem employees or repeatedly and unsuccessfully trying to convince them that they should improve their performance. Although in exasperation you may end up sacking them, that's a sign of failure, not firmness. Second, my method does require an investment of time, but it is an investment that should get you to a resolution of the problem sooner than other means would. That's because it requires you to move beyond the point of "stuckness" that characterizes so many relationships with problem people.

Keep in mind that this approach is designed to create a resolution—not necessarily a solution—to the problem you face. While the method should help you avoid some common pitfalls in trying to motivate difficult employees (see the sidebar "Seven Hazards in Handling Problem People"), you won't be able to transform every unmotivated employee. And even if an employee's behavior does change, you may not get exactly what you originally

wanted. But the three-step method I propose will put an end to the evasions, repetitions, and broken promises. And it will likely yield options that you hadn't even considered. At the very least, it will drive you to a moment of truth, a point at which you and the employee together can see a path to the goal you have set—or agree that no solution is possible.

Step 1: Create a Rich Picture

Tom has been struggling to help Jack improve his performance. But with each warning, Jack, who is naturally shy, just seems to get quieter. In the end, without fuss or ceremony, Tom tells Jack that things aren't working out and he'll have to leave the company. In the days that follow, Jack's former colleagues are abuzz with talk about his sudden dismissal—and what they've just learned about his situation. It turns out that both of Jack's parents had recently died after lingering and debilitating illnesses. Until now, no one, including Tom, knew what he had been going through.

Jack's case is extreme, but it illustrates a phenomenon distressingly common in business. A problem employee is taken through the usual appraisal routines and management discussions and then is dismissed—sometimes after years of unproductive performance. Shortly thereafter, the line manager learns from the person's former peers about something that may have been behind the poor performance. The manager never knew about it because of the employee's pride or natural reserve—or because the individual disliked or mistrusted the manager.

The first step thus requires that a manager work to understand where a problem employee is coming from: What drives that person? What blocks those drives? What might happen if the impediments are removed? But that isn't all. Two other factors also figure in the equation: you, as the boss, and the context within which the problem is occurring.

Let's start with the employee. How can Tom know so little about what is affecting Jack's work? How well does Annette understand Colin? What does Paolo really know about George? Clearly, these managers need more information. It can come from peers, subordinates, or previous bosses. Much of the data will come, however, from problem employees themselves. You need to have a series of informal conversations—at the water cooler, over lunch, at social events—that will give you insight into what your employees are really about. What does the world look like from where the employee sits? How have his expectations and desires been molded by key past experiences? What passions govern his choices? What stifles these passions in the workplace? This may sound difficult, but in executive classes I teach, I find that people can learn

these things about one another in a ten-minute interview, if they ask the right questions. After all, we often have these conversations at dinner parties; we just rarely have them at work. What you discover will likely surprise you. A test of this would be asking problem employees to describe themselves. It's almost a certainty that they would use different words from the ones you might use.

These informal conversations are the starting point in effectively motivating problem people. For example,

Annette learns through some asking around that Colin, outside work, is building a house. No motivation problem there!

Next, you need to look at your own role in the problem you've been trying to solve, especially because direct bosses are the most potent source of employee dissatisfaction and the chief reason people quit their jobs. In fact, you may be the main, if inadvertent, cause of your employee's lack of motivation; for one reason or another, you are bringing out the worst rather than the best in the person you're trying to help. You will have to do some honest soul-searching. And you'll need to do the same sort of asking around that helped you fill out your picture of the employee. Your problem employee may be uncomfortable talking about his or her perception of you, but over time you may even be able to piece together a picture—probably unflattering—of how you are viewed. Even if that picture seems unfair and inaccurate, remember: If something is perceived as real, it is real in its consequences.

Others can provide additional information. Paolo, in discussing George with another manager, complains: "He acts like I'm persecuting him, if you can believe that." Imagine Paolo's surprise when the colleague, who is a friend, responds, "Well, Paolo, I'm sure he's wrong about persecution, but you do come across as a bit of a bully sometimes."

What you learn may convince you that your relationship with the problem employee is dysfunctional beyond repair, at which point you should abandon the method and hand over the motivation task to someone else. More likely, though, the way you interact with a problem employee—for example, something as basic as the way you talk to that person—is simply a turn-off. What works fine with your other reports is hopelessly wrong for this individual. Needless to say, that can be a chastening realization, and many managers find it hard to face.

Finally, you need to analyze the context. Is something about the current situation bringing out the worst in the employee—and maybe in you? Annette thinks Colin's performance has deteriorated because of the increased demands the restructuring has placed on the project team. But Annette's under pressure, too. Are Colin's actions bothering Annette more than they

Seven Hazards in Handling Problem People

The Mulberry Bush Chase

Have you been going round and round with someone, having the same fruitless conversations over and over? That's a sure sign of the need for a new approach. Discard your assumptions about the person and start afresh.

The Huckster Hazard

Have you been trying to "tell and sell" — that is, convince the person of the reasonableness of your position? Don't be an evangelist. Be a psychologist. The most successful salespeople discover and fulfill people's needs rather than try to change them.

The Ignorance-Is-Bliss Syndrome

Have you been contentedly clueless, neither knowing nor caring much about what makes an employee tick? You have to dig deeper to find out what drives that person — and what may be blocking those drivers.

The Self-Centeredness Trap

Do the words that spring to mind when you think about this person's behavior reflect a blinkered point of view? Ask yourself what words this individual would use to describe those same behaviors. It may give you a fresh insight into the nature of the problem.

The Hanging Judge Tendency

Have you been proudly occupying a moral high ground in your perspective on this person? It won't help to think of your employee as in the wrong while you act out the role of judge or high priest. Decide now whether you really want to solve the problem or sit in judgment.

The Monochrome Vision

Have you failed to search for any redeeming features in this person? Think hard. Because discovering even one positive characteristic in someone can color your relationship in entirely new ways and create a starting point for you to connect.

The Denial Danger

Have you been dismissing out of hand how someone perceives you? Remember the dictum, "If something is perceived as real, it is real in its consequences." It is the other person's reality you are going to have to work with, not just your own.

would otherwise because of the stress she faces? Do her reactions to him, paradoxically, add to Colin's stress, creating a vicious cycle?

Once you embark on this kind of fact-finding mission, you'll see that you didn't have sufficient data to solve your problem. Quite possibly, your dislike has gotten in the way of getting to know the problem employee. Furthermore, you probably didn't think your own behavior could be partly to blame. And you probably haven't gone out of your way to look for situational factors that might in some sense excuse the employee's shortcomings. It's much easier simply to label people as difficult than to figure out how they got that way or implicate yourself in the mess.

But if you can break out of this narrow mind-set, you're more likely to get the employee to perform better. And you'll probably rethink what you wanted to achieve with this problem employee in the first place.

Step 2: Reframe Your Goals

Hans runs a division of a Swiss brokerage business. Luca is a member of a 12-person back-office team there that, although it processes customer accounts, has little customer contact. Luca's team is split into two factions, the result of his rumormongering and abysmal relations with the group's secretary—or so Hans believes. Hans doesn't particularly like Luca, who is very different from Hans: Luca is physically imposing, working class, a big spender who loves flashy cars and always seems to have money problems. Luca seems to feel similar antipathy toward Hans.

Although Luca's performance on the job isn't bad, Hans believes that Luca could achieve more, and improve overall group performance, if he spent less time gossiping and cultivated a better relationship with the secretary. He has

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casually mentioned this to Luca several times, to no avail, and Hans is ready to get rid of him. But from an informal poll of Luca's coworkers, Hans learns that most don't want him to go, despite the trouble he seems to cause. So Hans decides to confront Luca and demand that he get along with the secretary and stop playing office politics.

You may know firsthand the frustration that Hans feels: "I'm a reasonable person, trying to do a good job, facing an unreasonable person who refuses to acknowledge what is clearly the right and sensible way to solve this problem. I've told him what needs to be done. Why can't he *just do it*?" If you are faced with this situation, you're likely to simply give up, either by letting things drift or by

firing the employee involved. Unfortunately, your moralizing stance and failure to realize that not everyone sees things the way you do will limit both your chances of successfully motivating the employee and the options you consider for solving the problem. You'll be better served if you let go of your desire to bring a bad employee to justice—and instead determine what can be gained by rehabilitating a wayward one. You will be more effective if you are willing to switch from your predetermined solution to an array of possible outcomes.

In the case here, Hans believes the solution is to change Luca's behavior, which he sees as the source of the team's turmoil and Luca's poor performance. But if Luca is to blame for the team's problems, why aren't his coworkers eager for him to go? Hans decides to gather more information to enrich his picture of the situation. He learns that the team's lack of customer contact may be depriving Luca of the stimulus he needs for job satisfaction. Just as important, it may be engendering a "rats in a cage" atmosphere for the entire back-office team—an environment of infighting further poisoned by a recently introduced financial incentive scheme and Hans's neglect of team-building initiatives.

Viewed this way, Luca's behavior may be the effect rather than the cause of the problem. Once Hans begins to think about what makes Luca tick, he wonders whether Luca's natural proclivity toward gossip and office politics might be channeled into a positive social endeavor such as team building. Sure, Luca needs to rebuild bridges with the secretary—not to mention with Hans—but the true motivational challenge may be to co-opt Luca as an ally to improve the entire office's climate.

Let's be clear: Reframing your goals in this way doesn't represent capitulation. Yes, you sometimes may settle on more modest and achievable goals for your problem employee, ones that the individual will get behind and is capable of meeting. But a willingness to be flexible in your aims can also yield novel and ambitious alternatives you may not have

considered. In the end, you may not get exactly what you wanted from the employee, but you'll certainly get more than you did before.

Putting together a menu of possible outcomes is a crucial prerequisite to scheduling a formal encounter with the employee that is designed to solve or resolve the situation. Keep in mind that this menu may be augmented with a solution from that unlikeliest of sources: the employee. At the same time, this is not an "anything goes" agenda: You should be clear about bottom-line sticking points: those issues that, if you don't arrive at a solution to the problem, will shape a resolution—possibly the employee's termination.



Step 3: Stage the Encounter

Jerry has recently been appointed a department head at a pharmaceuticals company. As he settles in, he discovers he has inherited one very troublesome subordinate. Bernard – like Jerry, in his mid-30s – is an extremely competent scientist and very independent minded. Bernard performs well enough when given a defined and highly complex piece of work that puts his technical expertise to the test. But he fails to discuss his results until it is too late for Jerry to provide his own input. And Bernard resists doing anything that departs from his accustomed routines. Jerry suspects that Bernard could do his work more quickly without sacrificing quality. But when Jerry raises the issue, Bernard snubs him with technical explanations that Jerry doesn't fully understand.

Jerry learns that Bernard was once passed over for promotion and has had a bad attitude ever since. In fact, Bernard has made it plain to everyone that he resents having to report to someone he regards as his inferior in technical knowledge. Although Jerry thinks that Bernard should have been reined in long ago, he has attempted on numerous occasions to win over Bernard with friendly approaches. "What are you up to?" Jerry will ask. "You always seem to have such a creative approach to problems." But Bernard rebuffs him: "You'll never understand my work." Jerry is frustrated because he knows Bernard's considerable skills are not being fully used to benefit the

business. And the growing animosity between the two men doesn't bode well for improving the situation.

Hoping to help Bernard improve his performance, Jerry has gone through the first step of the method presented here: piecing together a layered picture of the man and how his past experiences and current situation (not to mention Jerry's arrival) may have contributed to the problem. Jerry decides that Bernard feels a need to preserve his dignity, which was diminished when he was passed over for promotion. This trait is getting in the way of Bernard making an energetic commitment to working for Jerry. With this more nuanced understanding, Jerry takes the method's second step: reevaluating what he hopes to get out of Bernard. Jerry's own boss has advised him, as many bosses would, to assert his authority and tell Bernard to shape up or ship out. But Jerry knows that approach probably won't do much good. Instead, he hopes to motivate Bernard by leveraging his inherent desire for dignity, respect, and recognition. He would like Bernard to see that he is taking a self-defeating stance and that big personal rewards can be had from bringing these drives to bear on new challenges.

At the same time, Jerry knows he needs to be tougher than he has been. So he decides to undertake a focused, face-to-face encounter with Bernard. One positive by-product of Jerry's analysis of the situation is a certain detachment about Bernard: Jerry recognizes his own negative feelings – which have become increasingly intense in

the face of Bernard's rudeness—but has put them aside before the encounter takes place. In fact, Jerry has even come to realize that he is part of the problem and that any positive outcome will almost assuredly require him to modify how he manages Bernard. If all goes well, Bernard, too, will begin to transform the way he views the situation.

This formal conversation with a problem employee, unlike the informal interactions you use to piece together a rich picture of the situation, is my method's third step. It should be a carefully staged event that underscores its importance. Hold the meeting on neutral ground—say, a conference room—and block out at least an hour for it. (In fact, it may take more than a single meeting, depending on how far you get in the first encounter.) You should tell the employee about it a day or so in advance, but emphasize that no materials or preparation are needed; this will not be a formal appraisal meeting but a chance to review and revise your working relationship. In fact, the only physical props you will need are a table and two chairs, set at a right angle.

The meeting opens with what I call an *affirmative assertion*, a brief “soft-hard” introduction. You affirm the employee's past and future value to the organization and express your desire for a mutually beneficial outcome to the meeting. But you also honestly describe the current problem as it looks to you and assert that things cannot and will not continue as they are now. For example, Jerry might say to Bernard:

“Thanks for meeting with me. I've been thinking about how we work together, and I have to tell you I'm not happy. My sense is that you aren't, either. I'm not exactly sure what the problem is. That's why I want us to talk now. I admire your talents and what you offer the company, but our previous conversations have shown me that we see our roles quite differently. I don't like the way you've responded to me on a number of occasions, but I realize you may feel the same way. I think you can help me to help us get on a different footing and identify new ways to work together. Certainly things can't go on the way they are—I won't let them.”

You then need to engage in what I call *leverage questioning*. This is an intense and extended inquiry that tests hypotheses you have formulated in the course of developing your picture of the situation. Jerry's questions probe Bernard's need for recognition and ways in which it might be co-opted for productive ends. While one aim of such questions is to find unknown and potentially fruitful areas of agreement, they are also meant to bring differences into the open. In fact, one sign of a failed encounter—yet another “Sure, boss” meeting—is the employee managing to get out of the room without expressing a contrary view.

Care is needed here: It is very easy to slip back into telling and selling, shoveling facts and arguments onto

the employee in order to bury that individual under the weight of the evidence. Even if you avoid this pitfall, the employee may still be evasive, defensive, hostile, or uncommunicative. Your goal is to discern in the haze of discontent the fleeting conversational windows that open up new views of the situation or offer opportunities to leverage your employee's driving passions.

For example, Jerry confronts Bernard on a sensitive issue: “Okay, I know you are technically superior to me. That's fine. So what do you think my role should be, then? What can I do to help you?”

Bernard doesn't hesitate in his response: “Nothing. Nobody around here with any technical smarts gets any respect anyway.”

Jerry sees an opening: “Gee! Is that how you feel? Well, I guess I can see how that might have been a problem in the past. In fact, I understand why you were upset when you didn't get that promotion. But I value technical expertise. I think we could figure out how to put yours to better use—and in a way that would give you some credit for it.”

The stage is set for the *moment of truth*. Jerry and Bernard have reached some agreement on at least part of the problem. And Jerry has brought Bernard to the point where he can help find a solution—one that plays to the qualities that motivate him. To return to the judo metaphor, Jerry has blocked Bernard by insisting that things will not continue as they are. Now Jerry will try to execute a throw, using Bernard's own energy as the impetus for movement toward Jerry's goals:

“Bernard. Thanks for being so open with me. I have a much better understanding of the issues as you see them. What you are saying suggests that your job might be restructured so you can do things that take fuller advantage of your exceptional talents. I'm thinking, for example, of high-profile advisory and coaching work for teams within our unit. I'd like you to come up with some concrete proposals about what form this work might take. I'll do the same, and we'll meet again in a week. Listen, we'd rather keep you than lose you. But continuing in your present position, at least as you have defined it, is not viable. What do you think?”

The Broader Benefits

Remember that the method I have described guarantees a resolution, not a solution, to a problem of the kind Jerry faces. To see the difference between these two outcomes, let's return to Annette and Paolo. In her encounter with Colin, Annette engages in a new kind of conversation, hoping to figure out what his drivers are and where they are being blocked. She concludes that he is highly motivated in other areas of his life but doesn't respond well to pressure. She sees that such pressure will only be heightened if she tries to make him feel guilty about letting


down his team when it needs him most. He needs different, not greater, responsibility. When Annette probes to find out what really engages Colin, the key turns out to be helping others. How can this insight be used to motivate him? During their meeting, Colin raises the possibility of assuming a training role—one that he successfully migrates into during the subsequent months.

Paolo's case is trickier and doesn't have such a happy ending. The problem is resolved but not solved. Paolo's original goal was to get George to admit that he needed to be more accountable for his work. But after some thinking, Paolo decides he simply wants George to see that moving beyond the current situation is going to require making some difficult choices. They sit down together and Paolo offers specific data about George's performance. These hard facts help George realize that he's having a problem in his new position and admit that he isn't motivated to solve it. The two agree that the next step is for Paolo to help George move into a role with less customer contact. This does indeed happen—but without Paolo's help. Two weeks after their meeting, George accepts a job with another company. While Annette got a clear win, Paolo had to console himself that the outcome was better than the collision he had expected: George being fired and taking his rage and resentment with him to another employer. In fact, George ultimately was probably grateful for the new beginning that sprang from his moment of truth with Paolo.

Whether a problem is solved or simply resolved, the payoffs to be gained by using this method extend beyond the present situation and the individuals involved. Besides increasing your chances of motivating problem individuals, the method can help you motivate your entire work group.

Turning around a problem person boosts everyone's morale. One of the most common workplace complaints is that bosses don't deal with poor performers. Typically, successive bosses leave a problem person alone, shying away from the mixture of cost and futility they anticipate would come from any attempt to improve matters. So when the employee perks up and starts acting more reasonably, the outward ripples are palpable.

But it's not just that people now find it easier working with someone who once was a problem. Your efforts also send a strong message. When people want a boss to "deal with" a poor performer, that doesn't always mean outright dismissal. Recall Luca's coworkers, who resisted Hans's efforts to sack the troublemaker. In your efforts to turn someone around—even if you ultimately fail and the person quits—people will see the mark of a manager and a culture that prefer problem solving to waste disposal. Summarily getting rid of someone, on the other hand, signals that the organization discards rather than deals with difficult people—and who knows who might be next?

The benefits across your organization can themselves justify the demands of this method. Yes, it can be time-consuming, difficult, and fraught with risks and setbacks: Although some employees may respond quickly to your approach, others might require time to rebuild positive relationships with you and their work. But at least they will be heading in the right direction, under their own steam. And in the end, you ideally will have not only a rehabilitated employee but also a healthier, more productive organization. 

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